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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002061

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SUBJECT: TURKISH HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC
AFTER PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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Classified By: A/Political Counselor Kelly Degnan for reasons 1.4(b),(d)
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1.(SBU) Summary: Leaders from Turkey's human rights organizations welcomed the July 22 elections as a step forward for democracy, but remain skeptical of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) commitment to implementing reforms. These representatives plan to urge the AKP use its mandate to enact a progressive constitution that strengthens civilian control over the military, guarantees individual freedoms, and protects minority rights. They believe the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party's (DTP) presence in Parliament could help resolve the long-standing Kurdish issue, so long as all sides maintain the conciliatory stance displayed so far. End summary.

Voters React to Military and Judicial Intervention

2.(C) Our human rights contacts unanimously agreed that Turkey's electorate sent the military and judiciary a message not to intervene in the political process. Bulent Atamer, with the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, told us in light of the military's April 27 "e-ultimatum", which derailed April presidential elections, many voters saw no other plausible choice but the ruling Justice and Development party (AKP). MazlumDer member and former chairman Yilmaz Ensaroglu believed that ambivalent voters were also pushed toward AKP by the Constitutional Court's surprising May 1 decision to require a 367 quorum to elect a new President. Human Rights Foundation President Yavuz Onen told us he remains skeptical of AKP's religious roots but viewed the election as an important step in Turkey's democratic evolution.

The Goal of a New Constitution

3.(C) Our contacts hoped the AKP now would use its strong mandate to enact a new constitution. Nurulla Sarihan, Assistant President of MazlumDer, told us his group's overarching goal is a constitution that confers clear civilian control over the military, diminishes the power of the unelected bureaucracy, and respects the rights of all Turkish citizens, including Kurds and Alevis. Human Rights

Association Acting President Reyhan Yalcindag said the document should grant full recognition to Kurds and other minorities by allowing them to express themselves through their native language and culture. All foresaw an uphill battle, but expected AKP to show courage in the face of predictable opposition from the military and secular state establishment.

Women's Rights

4.(SBU) Halime Guner, President of the women's rights group Flying Broom, said the election results were a step forward for women. Guner told us that AKP, though imperfect, had supported women's rights more than other parties and were likely to continue a reform agenda that would benefit women. According to Guner, the AKP had weeded out its more conservative candidates to become a centrist party; they would not jeopardize that by pursuing reforms to allow women to wear headscarfs in public buildings. Guner hoped AKP would nominate a new, forward-leaning Minister of Women's Affairs who would listen to and work with women's grassroots organizations. Flying Broom stands ready to work with the GOT to solve deep-rooted problems such as high levels of violence against women and honor killings, she stated.

Improved Conditions for Turkey's Kurds

5.(C) Human rights contacts welcomed DTP's election to parliament after a 14 year hiatus (reftel) but cautioned that

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real progress on the Kurdish issue would depend on DTP's 20 deputies remaining nonconfrontational in the face of expected opposition. Although early signals have been positive -- DTP's Ahmet Turk and MHP's Devlet Bahceli shaking hands, and newly-elected Speaker Koksal Toptan's call on DTP headquarters -- our contacts described the situation as fragile. Former Human Rights Association president Alatas said parliament could grow tense quickly if either DTP or Nationalist Action Party (MHP) deputies resort to their usual inflammatory rhetoric; the situation would explode if the terrorist PKK grew impatient and launched attacks.

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Skepticism of AKP's Commitment to Human Rights
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6.(C) Reflecting the shared view on AKP's commitment to human rights reform, HRF's Onen told us that AKP had selectively embraced democratization. The AKP had welcomed reforms that would benefit the Sunni Muslim majority but shied away from granting more rights to non-Sunni Muslims. Activist and former MazlumDer Chairman Ayhan Bilgen said AKP had not followed up to implement human rights legislation it had passed under EU and USG pressure. Bilgen believed sustained international pressure would be the only way to revitalize Turkey's EU reform process, including on human rights issues. MazlumDer's Ensaroglu disagreed, saying the public's antipathy toward the EU and USG made foreign pressure a dull tool; only domestic pressure could convince the AKP to reinvigorate the process.

7.(SBU) Comment: Though skeptical of AKP's commitment to human rights reform, our human rights contacts were encouraged by the parliamentary election outcome, and ready to work cooperatively with the GOT if given the chance. These NGO leaders can be important allies to new MPs looking to move Turkey's human rights agenda forward. End comment.

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